

Celtic Pantheism in Coelho's *Brida*

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Abstract

This article investigates into pervasiveness of Celtic pantheism in Coelho's Brida. Pantheism is a dominant theme in Celtic Christianity that is a modern form of Christian spirituality based in traditional belief structures and practices of the Celtic cultures of Britain and Ireland. The British religious studies scholar Marion Bowman Celtic spirituality defines Celtic Christianity that includes Celtic Christianity, and Celtic Paganism. While noting interrelations between other non-Christian forms, in this paper I mainly examine Celtic pantheism and analyze the interactions among the primary characters as portrayed in the novel.

Keywords: Celtic Christianity, Pantheism, Religion, Values

Introduction

The article is from a religious studies perspective in which the task is to “properly analyze religion rather than to defend or engage in it” (Taylor 1374), and utilize David Chidester’s “availability of symbols” mode of engagement with religious appropriation to analyze the dynamics of conflict and exchange between critics and supporters of Celtic Christianity (158). Because modern Celtic Christianity, through its popular literary expressions, values nature and encourages engagement with the social and ecological crises of the world, it may be seen as representative of a new type of nature-based religion. This perspective regarding the modern Celtic Christianity movement aids the interactions undertaken by the characters.

Discussion

The paper studies the novel from the perspective of celtic pantheism. For Celtic Christians, God is not a distant being, barely involved in the fallen material world. Instead, God, through the members of the Trinity and the saints, remains highly active in a basically good world, covered only by the works of sin. Though they claim historical continuities with pre-Christian beliefs, many modern Celtic Christians emphasize the orthodoxy of their tradition. For Celtic Christians, this theology presents an important alternative to the cold, distant theology of the Church but does not involve a break with what they conceive to be essential aspects of Christian belief.

Donald Meek, a Celtic Studies scholar and vocal critic of the modern Celtic Christian movement says, “The linguistic anchor is undoubtedly the most secure mooring which can be provided for the term” (8). The Celtic languages exist as a branch of Indo-European languages. While there certainly may have been many more Celtic languages, most linguistic evidence comes from the western-most groups in Brittany, Britain and Ireland. Donald Meek says of the more loose modern usage, “nowadays, while the term ‘Celtic’ is still used by scholars in its linguistic and cultural sense, it is widely employed as a form of shorthand to denote more or less anything which is believed to be associated with the non-English aspects of the cultures of Scotland, Ireland, Man, Cornwall and Brittany” (8-9). For Meek and Chapman, current popular understandings of the term “Celt” derive from romantic or simplistic constructions of an idealized past by modern persons. Though it is important to note these issues of power and the presence of romantic ideals involved in modern popular accounts of the Celts, the term itself serves as a working descriptor of very real and distinguishable historical peoples and serves as a symbol for modern believers in Celtic spiritualities (McIntosh 1). The dominance of Celtic spirituality pervades in the novel.

J. Phillip Newell outlines some of the most important general characteristics of modern Celtic Christianity. Though his work provides a basis for this section, it is not definitive of all Celtic Christian theology. Other writers also emphasize agreements on certain points and to reveal important differences in popular Celtic Christian thought. In his work, Newell emphasizes God's revelations in the natural world in a form of the “two book” metaphor. The “two book” metaphor involves recognition of *the Book of Nature* or “the Christian concept of nature as a book, written by the hand of God and serving as a companion volume to the book of Scripture” (210). Utilizing this idea of *the Book of Nature* in a meditation and prayer guide entitled *Promptings from Paradise* (1998) Newell says, “Hearing the Word in the church and hearing the Word in the world are not opposed to each other” (13). Philip Sheldrake agrees with Newell’s *Book of Nature* approach and states that, for medieval Celtic Christians, “nature was a kind of second sacred book, parallel to the scriptures that revealed the divine” (73). This *Book of Nature* teaches beyond the reach of Christian literature, as Newell says, “the mystery of God was being communicated in the world, through creation and in the lives of men and women, long before religion came into being. In fact it was the hearing of God in the world that gave rise to religion. In the Christian tradition we may claim a two-thousand-year tradition of hearing God in the church's mysteries of word and sacrament. It needs always, however, to be set in the context of the fifteen-billion-year tradition of God speaking in creation” (14). In this extract, Newell reveals a certain universalism and acceptance of geological science in his creation-centered theology.

Newell argues that this focus upon creation, or *the Book of Nature*, is and has always been a critical feature of Celtic Christianity. He emphasizes this point in several of his writings. He says, “Where do we look, therefore, to learn of God? It is not away from ourselves and away from creation, but deep within all that has life. That is where the truth of God is hidden, like treasure, buried in a field” (xvi). He also states, in a meditation upon the

seven days of creation, “At the heart of all that has life is the light of God. This is a fundamental belief of the Celtic tradition” (3). Elsewhere Newell says, “The feature of Celtic spirituality that is probably most widely recognized, both within and outside the Church, is its creation emphasis” (3). God’s truth inhabits creation and remains knowable and accessible to those with sufficient sensitivities.

Seán Ó Duinn asserts that there is a special attention placed on creation within the Celtic tradition. Ó Duinn also makes clear, however, that the medieval Celtic Christians also accepted the transcendence of God, remaining theologically orthodox, as he says, “there was no difference in belief in this matter between the Celts and other Christians; both parties held that God was both transcendent and immanent, as is necessary for orthodoxy, but the Celts tended to place particular emphasis on the immanence of God” (8). The Lutheran theologian Paul Santmire also argues for the orthodoxy of early Celtic Christians, asserting that the reverence for nature seen among the Celtic saints derives from a deep love of God and the future of salvation. He says, “their oft-noted ecological sensitivities and their celebrated affirmations of nature were, for them, profoundly rooted in their universalizing eschatological and christological convictions” (308). Scholars such as Ó Duinn while supporting certain aspects of modern Celtic Christianity, attempt at the same time to establish the tradition as essentially Christian and avoid any movement toward the denial of a transcendent God or of the divinity of Jesus.

Brida is committed to learning magic that can help her to experience the presence of the almighty. The novel is a moving tale of love, passion, and suspicion. It is a story of a young beautiful Irish girl and her search for knowledge. She pursues the purpose in life. She hopes to learn the secrets of life and existence by moving her towards magic and mysticism. Meanwhile, she seeks for love as well. Her meeting with her teachers plays a crucial role in her life, as she learns how to overcome fears and how to dance to the hidden music of the world. Her teachers explore a gift in her and accordingly they encourage her to discover that talent. As Brida seeks her destiny, she strives to find a balance between her relations and her desire to transform herself. As her quest is sacred, she moves on.

The protagonist desires to become a witch. Therefore, she seeks the aid of the Magus who teaches her the teachings of the Tradition of the Sun and of the wisdom about things and Wicca who educate her of the Tradition of the Moon to perform the diverse rituals relating to the different cycles of the moon such as to dance in tune to the Sound of the World, to identify the different cures of herbs, and to feel the energy of the clothes she has. Brida’s journey is more of a spiritual transformation. Through the rituals and rites, she is able to awaken the inactive voice of her soul that signifies her preparedness to be led as a complete witch. Nevertheless, her journey does not end there. The final condition for her self-actualization is her talent to transform all the knowledge she has learned into wisdom through the use of the force of sex because it opens the doorway to both real and magical worlds. In this way, she is able to achieve the peak of her journey in both the spiritual and material planes with the help of her soul mates. When she meets the Magus, her teacher, she strives to impress him:

‘Don’t you think you’re rather young?’

‘I’m twenty-one,’ said Brida.

‘If I wanted to start learning ballet, I’d be considered too old.’

The Magus made a sign for her to follow him. They set off together through the forest, in silence.

‘She’s pretty,’ he was thinking as the shadows cast by the trees rapidly lengthened and shifted as the sun sank lower on the horizon.

‘But I’m twice her age.’ This, he knew, meant that he might well suffer.

Brida not only beautiful women but also she is an honest women too. (18)

The Magus is a man who isolates himself from the world, an act he performs as a reward for his prior violation on the law of love. He is in love and gets hurt, but the worst part of it is that he violates the fundamental law of love that he interferes in Bride’s free will. When the Magus asks some questions to her, when the Magus asks something to Brida, she must answer truly, when she wants become her student. The strictness of the Magus shows the honesty on the part of him as a teacher. As a learner, Brida has to accomplish the task assigned to her. Without hesitation, she is expected to celebrate the task. The Magus asks Brida if she gives up everything she has learned and will learn about magic and mysteries if she finds the love of her life. This question brings discomfort to Brida since for her, love is crucial, but assessing on the Magus’ way of life, there is a possibility of his failure at understanding romantic love. His only redemption is to wait for his soul mate to reach and release him from burden without his manipulation of any sort to encourage the flourishing of love. Similar to other women characters, Brida is feeling afraid about something such as loneliness, and danger. However, she still believes that she has a faith in the God and the Guardian Angel:

‘I must get a grip on myself,’ she thought, but it was impossible. Images of snakes and scorpions and childhood ghosts began to appear before her. Brida was too terrified to stay calm. Another image arose: that of a powerful magician who had made a pact with the Devil and was offering her up as a sacrifice.

‘I have faith,’ she started to say softly.’

‘I have faith in God, faith in my Guardian Angel, who brought me here, and who remains here with me’. (14)

Brida have interested with a books. There is one of the bookstores, which sell any book about specialization in occult studies in the centre of Dublin. The discussion related to occult studies connects the reader with the crux of Celtic spirituality. When Brida has time, she always goes there to learn about designs and symbols in some of the books. But she never bought any because they were all imported and very expensive. She would live through them, studying the designs and symbols in some of the books, and intuitively tuning in to the vibration of all that accumulated knowledge. Sometimes, Brida has feeling to know any person visit in the book store and looking up to each person, women or men which they read. When she walks away, she always opens that book looks something interesting.

Brida gives in with all the things she does, “I’m always starting things and then giving up,” she thought rather sourly. Perhaps life would soon realize this and stop presenting her with the same opportunities over and over. Or perhaps, by always giving up when she had only just started, she had exhausted all possible paths without even taking a single step” (37). As the extract mentions, Brida is a beautiful, clever, honest, powerful, and interested woman. Coelho represents characters characterizing through the physical traits and personality through speech, behavior, and actions and the interpersonal relationship among the characters in the novel. As she is a typical character, she represents Celtic community that is flexible and understanding.

Brida has a love affair with two persons that is her soul mate; Lorens and her teacher, Magus. Her love affair is because of erotic urges. Her emotions control her. Her behaviors and actions are controlled by her desires for intimacy and love. Brida strives to look for her soul mate. When someone learns magical power, the perfection is when someone gets and knows her true soul mate. In reality, Brida has a soul mate, Lorens. However, she doubts that Lorens is her soul mate. Therefore, she falls in love with her teacher, Magus, when she learns magical power. Thus, she maintains relationship with these men. Brida knows more about soul mate. She understands well when Wicca explains about soul mate to her. From Wicca’s explanation, Brida becomes conscious about the meaning of soul mate in this life. This is important for a witch because when the witch finds their soul mate, it means that all the knowledge that they get is complete and they can know the meaning of this life truly. Brida asks Wicca, how she knows her soul mate is. In response, Wicca states:

“But how will I know who my Soul Mate is?” Brida felt that this was one of the most important questions she had ever asked in her life. Wicca laughed. She had already asked herself that question and with the same eager anxiety as the young woman opposite her. The Tradition of the Moon used a different process: a kind of vision that showed a point of light above the left shoulder of your Soul Mate. “By taking risks,” she said to Brida. “By risking failure, disappointment, disillusion, but never ceasing in your search for Love. As long as you keep looking, you will triumph in the end.” (23)

All the teachers have the same experience that happen in her student. This case explains Brida’s feeling. Therefore, Wicca as a Brida’s teacher explains more about soul mate and she answers Brida’s questions that she ever asks to her teacher. This is the way to make Brida understand the concept of soul mate. As to Brida’s learning that Magus is her soul mate, one day when Brida with Magus, there is a mysterious voice said to her that Magus really needs her:

Something was telling her that he needed this, and it wasn’t the mysterious Voice of the Tradition of the Moon, but the restless, sometimes foolish voice of her heart. A voice she didn’t often listen to, since it always led her along paths she couldn’t understand.

But emotions were, indeed, wild horses, and they demanded to be heard. Brida let them run free for a while until they grew tired. Her emotions were telling her how

good it would be that afternoon if she were in love with him, because when you were in love, you were capable of learning everything and of knowing things you had never dared even to think, because love was the key to understanding all of the mysteries. (70)

Brida feels that something mysterious that shows the Magus her soul mate. She imagines that she does anything with Magus. Brida feels comfortable when Brida together with Magus. This actually happens because the Magus is her soul mate. Therefore, she has a feeling well when she is together. Meanwhile Brida is conscious about Lorens and takes him as her soul mate. One day she expresses her love for him because Lorens shows the joy of love to her. Besides, Brida asks him to love her:

“I want to tell you that I love you,” Brida said softly. “Because you’ve shown me the joy of love.”

Brida kissed him. She felt the taste of his mouth, the touch of his tongue. She was aware of every movement and sensed that he was feeling exactly the same because the Tradition of the Sun always reveals itself to those who look at the world as if they were seeing it for the first time.

“I want to make love with you right here, Lorens.” (77)

Lorens is Brida’s first soul mate. She really loves him. She shows and says that she really loves him, and does something to appreciate for their love. She always thinks about the soul mate. She remembers something when she meets Lorens first time. She thinks that there is light in the Lorens’ eyes:

If she were to meet Lorens in a crowded theater, without ever having spoken to him before, the moment their eyes met, she would know for sure that he was the man for her. She would find a way of approaching him, and he would welcome her approaches, because the Traditions are never wrong: Soul Mates always find each other in the end. Long before she knew anything about Soul Mates, she had often heard people speak about that inexplicable phenomenon: Love at First Sight. (89)

Brida suspects that Lorens is her soul mate. She tries to make herself believe that Lorens is her soul mate because she ever looks the light in his eyes like the light in the eyes of Magus. Thus, both of the men are Brida’s soul mates. The witches believe that the person has two reincarnations. Magus is Lorens, Brida’s soul mate’s reincarnation. Brida thinks that Lorens is proud of her, and she thinks that how much he loves her. Lorens loves Brida much, “Brida went over to Lorens. His eyes were shining, and she felt how very proud he was of her and how much he loved her. They could grow together, create a new way of living, discover a whole Universe that lay before them, just waiting for people of courage like them” (116). The extract confirms that Brida’s strives to know that the Magus is her pleasure but she cannot with him forever, because he is her pleasure. However, she cannot with him forever because he is the teacher of Tradition, and the last is Brida’s endeavor to know that Lorens is her true soul mate because he always gives joy in Brida’s life. Seema Dutta and Ruchi Nigam in their paper, “Searching the Other Half: The Concept of soulmate in Paulo Coelho’s *Brida*” clarifies the concept of the reincarnation that is predominant in Celtic

Christianity. They assert, “The theory of Soulmate also entwines with it the ideas of reincarnation and the multiple ways by which one can recognize the other half” (95). They explore the concept of soul mate in the novel and further say that the novel demonstrates many ideas about the existence of soulmates along with the ways by which the presence of soulmate can be perceived.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that when Brida develops relationship with her teacher Magus, she has faith in the God. She seeks for soul mate that implicitly indicates her quest for God that she experiences everywhere. The lesson of faith is predominant in the novel. The author correlates the faith of Irish people with their day to day life as portrayed in the novel. People plan for future but it is unpredictable. This faith leads people to live freely as Brida does in the novel. She continues her journey without worrying about the forthcoming happenings. She is carefree and thus she accomplishes her mission.

All in all Brida as the main character does anything to know her pleasure, soul mate. She learns about Wicca how to know the soul mate is, she feels comfortable when she is together with Magus because Magus is the second Brida’s soul mate reincarnation, and she believes that Lorens is her soul mate because she gets the light of Lorens’ eyes and Lorens always gives joy to Brida’s life. To lead a free life, people have to make mistakes and they need to take risks as well because their mistakes will lead them to the success.

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